Why the Divine Sarah Is Afraid to Visit Us Again

World Famous Tragedienne, Who Has Lavished Millions in Charity and on Her Friends, Fears the Dread Tax Collector Who Wants a Paltry $20,000—Grieved She Cannot Accept Invitation to Come to America

By C. DE VIDAL HUNDT.

Mme. Bernhardt directs me to request for her the pleasure of your attendance at luncheon at 1 o'clock.
NORMAN.
Secretary, Particular.

THUS from the hand of a slender little page who appeared at my hotel door, smartly dressed in "Bernhardt blue," there befell me the great honor.

One may lunch with the President of France, an Ambassador or even a Premier and think it only an interesting novelty of the day. But to lunch with the Divine One—Oh! that, indeed, brings upon one the attention and the envy of all Paris.

He who is humble wonders at once why he is so distinguished. A Marshal of France may thank his baton if Sarah asks him to tea. A visiting Prince may know that it is his kingdom, and not he, the great Bernhardt asks to dine. But such a modest person as a mere traveler in Paris —why!

Yet I knew. And it made me sad.

I had come from the States, and I was soon to return. Mme. Bernhardt would want me to explain to some of her very dear friends in America just why she might not be able to accept a very important invitation to be with them at a forthcoming celebration.

She wanted to come. She wanted to visit America again, yet the States were forbidden to her. I knew she would want me to be her unofficial messenger to explain it to her dear friends over here.

It is the cruel tax collectors who are to blame. The great Sarah owes them $20,000. And "$20,000!" I could hear her saying it—"Ah, Monsieur, whoever loved France when there was so much to be done for her poilus has not $20,000 left!"

And Mme. Bernhardt loved France when there was so much to be done for her poilus on those days when the poilus came home. So she has not the twenty thousand dollars which, she fears, the tax collectors would ask of her if she returned to America.

For Mme. Bernhardt left the States at the close of her last visit here without settling her accounts with the tax collectors, who should have had their percentage of her income from her public appearances during that visit. How she escaped making this payment is not clear. Certainly it was not intentional. It must have been an oversight of the tax people themselves.

But, however that may be, Mme. Sarah's wealth consists almost solely of the love of the world and includes very few of its dollars—not more than enough surely than to support her splendid little palace and the ladies in waiting, liveried attendants and pages which every queen must have to complete her atmosphere.

There always are a dozen or more of these in her entourage, servants who would not leave her, men and women whose devotion to the great artist seems like a strange cult; butlers and secretaries and handmaids who endure and mirror the moods of their queen with a sort of stoic fidelity that always impressed me.

But now let me go to accept my invitation.

From the growl of Pierre, who opened the door, or the puckered brow of old Dr. Marot, her private physician, I could always tell whether Madame was in good spirits or in a temper. I must say the latter was not often the case, however, for Sarah always is gracious, and particularly so to Americans.

Her Last New York Visit, And a Curious Scene

I remember when I last saw her in New York, three or four years ago. She had lost her leg and was about to be operated upon for some other trouble. I had received a telegram asking me to come to lunch at the Savoy Hotel, where she occupied a suite of six rooms. For some unaccountable reason the maid who opened the door that day did not announce me to her mistress and as I stood, unnoticed, upon the threshold of the room I witnessed a curious scene.

Bernhardt was at a small table laid for two. Her back was turned to the windows. On the right and left of her were two maids busily arranging the folds of her dress and the laces of her sleeves that nearly covered her hands. But Madame seemed angry, audibly angry. Her steel gray eyes were so busy flashing disapproval at the two handmaids and her vividly painted lips so busy expostulating with them that she did not see me in the door or hear my "Bonjour, Madame." Of course, the maids knew she did not mean a word she said.

"*Mon dieu*, how stupid you are," the Divine One was crying in accents that sounded nothing like those of her dying *Camille*. "If you are not finished in one minute I'll send you both back to tend pigs in your home village."

Under this avalanche of fretfulness the perspiring maids were putting the finishing touches upon the toilette of their mistress when my coughing attracted their attention. Almost immediately the scene changed. The expression in Sarah's face relaxed and gave way to her famous smile "*des grandes occasions*."

"*Ah, vous etes la, cher ami? Comme je suis contente de vous voir.*"

It was as if a gust of wind had swept her ill humor out of the window. She beamed upon me, with hand extended, and the maids beamed likewise. Bernhardt never troubles her friends with her domestic problems. For the world she has only smiles.

Anything but the Operation Appeared on Her Mind

All she ate on that occasion was a little dab of mashed potatoes. She was to go on the operating table the next day. But she was not giving a thought to her ailment. Bernhardt had something in mind that seemed to her of greater importance. A card was brought in from Lily Langtry, who wished to see her.

"Tell her to come up in twenty minutes," said Sarah. Then she unfolded a plan to

One of the latest and best pictures of Mme. Bernhardt, taken on the steps of her Paris home.

me that seemed to be her only concern, something that would brook no delay.

"To-morrow they are going to operate on me," she said, "and one never knows what will happen. You know that the French artists, actors, painters and musicians were among the first to give their lives to France. The Government should have refused their services. The Ministry of Fine Arts should have compelled them to stay at home for the sake of the art of future generations.

"I believe in heredity. The greatest artists of France fell in battle and their sons and daughters must have inherited their genius. But how can this genius assert itself if these children remain in obscure environments? For I also believe in the influence of environment. My plan is to collect funds to build adequate homes for these children of French artists, where they can be trained in an artistic atmosphere and develop their latent qualities. I shall give half of my earnings in America to that cause, for they are my children, all of them."

So there was this great woman, on the eve of a capital operation, thinking of what she might do for the continuation of art in her country. She gave me letters from the President of France, from the Minister of Fine Arts and from Edmond Rostand, which I should use in starting the movement should she die. She said she would appear on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera and speak for the cause as she had never spoken before—if she lived.

But subsequent events, her long illness after the operation and an apathy on the part of the money giving public became obstacles insurmountable.

"May Mrs. Langtry come up now?"

Of course she could. It was an hour after she had sent up her card.

"She is charming," said Sarah Bernhardt, "but why are some women afraid of age? She is a grandmother and so am I, but I am proud of it and will be the happiest woman in the world when my two granddaughters make me a great-grandmother."

But to return to my luncheon with Madame Sarah in her beautiful home in the Boulevard Pereire. I was to be there at 1 o'clock, according to the note of Mme. Norman, her "particular" secretary. At 12:45 I was admitted by Pierre, who was "grouchy." Madame had had a bad day evidently. There wasn't a soul in the little *salon de reception* just off the hall, so I strolled into the studio, where some day the body of the great tragedienne will lie in state in a magnificent coffin of her own design.

Studio Housed Lion Cub And Was Mecca of the Great

In that same studio a few years ago she kept a lion cub. The cub grew into a lion who was fed on tenderloin steaks to keep him from the calves of the visitors. When he began eating the visitors' calves anyway he was sent to the zoo.

In that same studio for nearly half a century the great minds of the world have paid homage to genius. Victor Hugo, Edmond Rostand, Theodore Roosevelt, Massenet, Saint-Saens, Roding, Lloyd George, Edward VII., when he was Prince of Wales, Kings and even an Emperor had kissed the hand of Bernhardt in that strange room.

They had passed like a kaleidoscopic pageant through this curious sanctum, leaving the impress of their personalities in a myriad of souvenirs, *objets d'art*, paintings, statuary, gobelins and priceless bric-a-brac that literally filled the room. I had never felt the mystic strangeness of the place more keenly. The hushed stillness and the mellow light from the masked glass dome above seemed to have foreordained the studio for the temporary mausoleum it is destined to be.

And yet it seemed filled with a thousand voices, caressing love notes mingling with the clarion calls of victory, gay peals of laughter drowning a sigh of despair, living sounds echoing the very heart pulse of the woman who had loved and suffered.

"Madame is waiting."

The summons came from Bernhardt's private secretary, who said her mistress had just returned from a three weeks' engagement in Brussels, and was still "a little tired."

A moment later the big swinging door leading from the *salon de reception* into the dining room was opened by two liveried men servants. The room was flooded with the sunlight that streamed in through two tall windows looking out on the boulevard. Between these two windows, at the head of a long table covered with flowers and costly china, sat Mme. Bernhardt, erect and smiling, her silver hair like a metallic relief against the amber background of her favorite Elizabethan chair.

A beautiful young woman, whom I recognized as her granddaughter, Lysda, was standing beside her. In the room were Dr. Marot, for eleven years her faithful medical watchdog, a grave *dame de compagnie* and one or two intimate friends. Bernhardt's smile was directed at her granddaughter in loving appreciation of violets she had brought.

For a moment I studied the pretty group. What a subject for a painter, the blossom of twenty-two and the snows of seventy-seven, both radiantly young in the caressing look that passed between them! It was such a delightful picture I hoped Bernhardt would not notice me. But presently she did.

Above is a familiar picture of the Divine Sarah taken at one of her famous salons. At left are sailors carrying her ashore after her last American tour.

"Ah, come and sit beside me," she said, motioning to the chair at her left, and then extending both lace covered hands. I kissed the lace from which protruded her delicately tinted hands —a simple homage, invited by a simple gesture.

"You first must eat," she said, "and then you shall tell me all about my beloved America. Do you want sherry or Tokay?"

"Both," said I. I already had booked passage for America and meant to be provident of all opportunity.

The fatigue of the engagement in Brussels did not show in Madame's face or in her conversation. Her voice had not lost its clear, crystaline ring and her fine, intellectual beauty seemed even more transcendent under the arctic aureola of her white hair than under the burnished copper of her "immortal" wig.

What a remarkable woman! The world has said it time and again upon reading the story of her marvelous life energy. Millions have exclaimed it under the swaying witchery of her art and magnetism, but only the few have felt the spell of her ineffable charm in her home surroundings. Sarah Bernhardt without makeup, except just a touch of carmine on her lips, seems a well preserved woman of 55, or a reincarnated marquise of an ancient regime in a powdered wig. I could see no trace of fatigue in her face, as she chatted with me of the things she plans to do.

The Business in Hand Contained in Long Cable

"Will you ever settle down and rest?" I asked.

"If I did I would die," she laughed.

Then at a signal her secretary brought in the cable from America, which I knew she would want to discuss with me. It read:

Los Angeles, Cal.
We, as representatives of American motion picture art, invite you to visit America to be honor guest in nationwide celebration of tenth birthday of feature motion picture. This invitation is in recognition of fact that you were first, as you have been greatest, artist to lead your genius to establish motion picture as art. Your example ten years ago in creating Queen Elizabeth in feature picture gave this new art impetus which has carried it to its position as important entertainment. Your appearance in "Queen Elizabeth" was inspiration to motion pictures, as your appearance on speaking stage always has been inspiration to drama. Please come.

The message was signed by the foremost names in the American movie world. The celebration mentioned is to be held soon, under the auspices of a great motion picture company, with nearly all prominent players taking part.

"Ah, *que c'est gentil*—how nice of them," said Bernhardt; but there was a sadness in her voice.

"I would like to go," she said, "and be with them once more, the last time, perhaps. I have been loved and spoiled by my American friends more than by any other and would like to accept, but I am afraid it will be impossible. I owe the American Government $20,000 income taxes on what I earned during my last visit there, and—I cannot pay it."

It was as I thought. Sarah Bernhart is poor. She always has been poor. Whatever she has earned she has given away. She has been paid fabulous sums for her appearances in America, but everything went as fast as it came in—most of it for the poilus who came home. Never has she known the value of money except for the pleasure it gave her to make other people happy.

I remember a trip I took with her in Capt. Banning's yacht one bright summer day from Los Angeles to Catalina Island. On arriving at the island Bernhardt heard the diving youngsters calling up to us for coins. It was the richest harvest the boys ever had, for Sarah threw fifty dollars in silver and many twenty dollar gold pieces over the railing. Not satisfied with this, every coin in the pockets of her party had to follow. And the youngsters below did not miss a single one.

On another occasion I saw her sign a huge check in Chicago for a girl who had dramatic talent but no money to pay for study. Playing for charity, here and in her own country, often had left her penniless, and I have never known an instance where Sarah Bernhardt refused help to the needy.

"Will you explain why I may not to able to come?" she asked me. "Perhaps it may be arranged. Somehow—perhaps—I shall earn some money unexpectedly. I hope so. But if I do not accept, tell them why."

Five weeks of hard work, appearing nightly, and sometimes twice a day, in the south of France soon will bring Bernhardt the munificent sum of 60,000 francs. This is $5,000 in our money, or about $125 a performance, and the chances are she will not return to Paris with more than a few hundred in her pocket.

And so if she does not visit America again I give here her excuses and pass on her message to the friends she loves and would like to see again. With her I hope she still will find the way to appease the tax collectors.

Bank of England's "Great Balance"

THE "great balance" stands in the bullion room of the Bank of England. It is a machine that was constructed, primarily, for testing light gold coins.

Standing approximately seven feet high and weighing nearly two tons, this wonderful piece of mechanism can weigh a piece of thistledown or a 400 pound gold bar with equal accuracy.

Before it can be used it must always be carefully dusted, for otherwise the dust that has settled upon it, even in the course of a few minutes, although invisible to the naked eye, would cause it to register inaccurately. So responsive is the machinery that a postage stamp placed on one of the two weighing portions moves the index six inches.

When the new English currency notes were issued the grand balance was kept busy virtually day and night weighing the gold coinage that was called in and replaced by notes. It has now been found that the total loss of gold, owing to the abrasion of the coins as they passed from hand to hand in the course of circulation, amounts to nearly $5,000,000.

That, however, is not quite so alarming as it sounds, for the loss is spread over a period of twenty-five years. Twenty-five years is reckoned in England to be the legal "life" of a sovereign at its full face weight.

THERE is being grown in Texas a tree new in this country, the Japanese tallow tree.

Trees of this species bear nuts containing a rich tallowlike oil that has been found valuable in the manufacture of high grade varnishes.

The climatic and soil conditions in certain parts of Texas are well adapted to the growth of this curious tree, and the experimental gardens have been supplying farmers throughout the lower Rio Grande Valley with young trees.